

Jack *Knifed*



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Labor Day weekend found me following my fiancée on I-395 from Arlington, to Norfolk, Va. Heavy traffic is common on this stretch of highway, but at 0940 this Saturday morning, it only was moderate. I had no idea that in a matter of minutes I would be involved in a mishap that stopped traffic for nearly an hour.

I was at the wheel of my 1998 Ford Explorer, towing a dual-axle U-Haul trailer loaded with my fiancée's furniture. I had towed the trailer from Norfolk to Arlington the day before; my calculations showed it was cheaper to do that than rent a trailer one-way. The trip up had been uneventful, and I wasn't worried about the trip back because I had towed U-Haul trailers before without incident. My

Explorer was well-equipped for towing: I had a Class V hitch installed on the frame, which, according to the U-Haul information, was more than enough to pull a trailer of this size.

My fiancée and I had loaded the trailer according to the weight recommendations, putting the bulk of the weight toward the front. We had checked to make sure the turn signals worked, and we had stopped in a parking lot before getting on the interstate to ensure the brakes worked and the tires were inflated correctly. The trailer had hydraulic brakes, designed to engage automatically if the towing vehicle began to slow.

The brakes and the lights had worked perfectly, so after a quick stop at Starbuck's, we were on our way. Because we had followed all the guidelines in the U-Haul instructions, we didn't think we had to worry about anything.

Ten miles into the trip, the highway went downhill slightly, and I suddenly felt the trailer pulling from side to side. My driving instincts told me to take my foot off the gas and to stay off the brake. Unfortunately, my slowing down didn't help. The oscillations became violent, and the out-of-control trailer pulled my Explorer from side to side.

I was driving in the third lane from the right on a four-lane freeway when the trailer jackknifed into the far-left median—one lane over. My Explorer started sliding down the highway sideways and hit the median on the front-passenger side, triggering the passenger air bag. The trailer hitch sheared off the frame, and the torque flipped the Explorer onto the driver's side. It then spun and slid three lanes to the right.

Aviation training teaches us to “fly through” a crash, and that's exactly what I had tried to do with my Explorer. I remained calm and kept my hands on the steering wheel, trying to regain control. In the end, though, I only could brace for the inevitable.

My air bag didn't engage, and when the Explorer came to rest three lanes over, I still was gripping the wheel. I held still, waiting to see if any traffic was going to hit me from behind. Miraculously, none did. When I felt sure the coast was clear, I opened the passenger-side window and climbed out.

My fiancée, who had been driving ahead of me, watched the mishap unfold in her rear-view mirror. As I emerged from the window, she came running, as did several drivers who had gotten out of their cars to help. They checked me for serious injuries but didn't find any.

I survived with only minor scratches and a bruise from the steering column, which is amazing, considering the force of the crash and the damage to my Explorer. I credit “driving through” the crash and a little divine intervention with keeping me intact and unhurt.

A Virginia state trooper and emergency vehicles arrived within minutes of the mishap, and my fiancée and the driver behind me testified that the trailer had started swerving on its

own. The trailer had embedded itself in a metal guardrail when the hitch separated from the Explorer, and a flatbed tow truck had to take the trailer to the nearest U-Haul facility. First, though, the trooper checked the trailer and said we should have it inspected. He did not fault me for the mishap.

We arranged for a tow truck to take my totaled Explorer to a wrecking lot, then went to the U-Haul facility where the tow truck had taken the trailer. We started a claims process that took more than two months to settle. When I had rented the trailer, I paid the optional \$5 for insurance on it—“a good idea in case we somehow scratch it,” I had thought. That decision turned out to be one of the best I've ever made because it covered the damage to the trailer, as well as all the contents.

We also learned something about towing trailers at the U-Haul facility—something that really shocked us. To regain control of a U-Haul trailer and to prevent it from jackknifing, you should not slow down. Instead, you should speed up—a fact that wasn't explained in the literature we had gotten when renting the trailer.

No one ever has been able to explain why our rented U-Haul did what it did, so I would urge anyone who tows a trailer of any kind to be cautious. Read and heed every warning and instruction. Carefully check the equipment, and, when the weather is bad, I urge you not to tow a trailer. If you find yourself in a situation like mine, stay calm, and try to keep enough control to “drive through” the crash. ■

The wind or passing another vehicle could have caused the initial sway. In most cases though, tow chains will prevent swaying, provided they are hooked up correctly. The principle behind how acceleration affects swaying problems is that when you change to a pulling force at the front of the vehicle (motor), you force the weight at the rear (trailer) to come into a straight line. You then may have to make moderate adjustments to speed and lane position, depending on the circumstances.—Mike Borkowski, traffic-safety specialist, Shore Safety Programs.